

# The Serpent of Genesis 3

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In Genesis 3 we have neither allegory, myth, legend, nor fable, but literal historical facts set forth, and emphasized by the use of certain Figures of speech.

All the confusion of thought and conflicting exegesis have arisen from taking literally what is expressed by figures, or from taking figuratively what is literal. A figure of speech is never used except for the purpose of calling attention to, emphasizing, and intensifying, the reality of the literal sense, and the truth of the historical facts; so that, while the words deployed may not be so strictly true to the letter, they are all the more true to the truth conveyed by them, and to the historical events connected with them.

But for the figurative language of verses 14 and 15 no one would have thought of referring the third chapter of Genesis to a snake: no more than he does when reading the third chapter from the end of Revelation (Revelation 20:2). Indeed, the explanation added there, that the “old serpent” is the Devil and Satan, would immediately lead one to connect the word “old” with the earlier and former mention of the serpent in Genesis 3: and the fact that it was Satan himself who tempted “the second man,” “the last Adam,” would force the conclusion that no other than the personal Satan could have been the tempter of “the first man, Adam.”

The Hebrew for “serpent” (Genesis 3:1) is *nâchâsh* from *nâchash*, to hiss, mutter, whisper, as do enchanter. Secondary senses are to divine, enchant, whence the frequent use of noun as “serpent.” The allied Chald. Word means brass, copper, from “an assumed root” meaning to be bright. Various passages tell us that term probably includes the sense of fascinate, enchant (See Deuteronomy 18:10 et. al). This element of fascination connects with the later use of *nâchâsh* as “serpent.”

The term *sârâph* (Pl. *s'ârâphîm*) is derived from *sârâph*, a Homonym meaning (1) to burn, (2) to be elevated. In Numbers 21:8 “a fiery serpent” = *sârâph*; (*s'ârâphîm*) is used of the heavenly ones of Isaiah 6:2, 6.

Thus *sârâph* is used of a fiery serpent and of an exalted celestial being; *nâchâsh* being similarly used to designate a serpent and a glorious spirit-being.

Indeed, a reference to the structure of Genesis 3 will show that the Cherubim (which are similar celestial or spirit-being) of the last verse (Genesis 3:24) require a similar spirit-being to correspond with them in the first verse (for the structure of the whole chapter is a great Introversion). The *Nâchâsh*, or serpent, who beguiled Eve (2 Corinthians 11:3) is spoken of as “an angel of light” in verse 14. Have we not, in this, a clear intimation that it was not a snake, but a being of glorious aspect, apparently an angel, to whom Eve paid such great deference, acknowledging him as one who seemed to possess superior knowledge, and who was evidently a being of a superior (not of an inferior) order? Moreover, in the description of Satan as “the king of Tyre” (Ezekiel 28:11-19, who is quite a different being from “the Prince of Tyre,” in verses 1-10, who is purely human) it is distinctly implied that the latter being was of a super natural order when he is called “a cherub” (Ezekiel 28:14, 16, read from verses 11-

19). His presence “in Eden, the garden of ‘Elohim” (verse 13), is also clearly stated, as well as his being “perfect in beauty” (verse 12), his being “perfect in his ways from the day he was created till iniquity was found in him” (verse 15), and as being “lifted up because of his beauty.” (verse 17)

These all compel the belief that Satan was the “old serpent” (Nâchâsh) in Genesis 3, and especially because the following words could be addressed to him: “Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee.” (verse 17)

Even supposing that these things were spoken to, and of, an exalted human being in later days (in Ezekiel 28) still “the king of Tyre” is not compared to a being who was non-existent; and facts and circumstances which never happened are not introduced into the comparison.

There is more about “the king of Tyre” in Ezekiel 28:11-19 than was literally true of “the prince of Tyre.” (verses 1-10) the words can be understood only of the mightiest and most exalted supernatural being that God ever created; and this for the purpose of showing how great would be his fall. The history must be true to make the prophecy of any weight.

Again, the word rendered “subtle” in Genesis 3:1 means wise, in a good sense as well as in a bad sense. In Ezekiel 28:12 we have the good sense, “thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom.” (Referring, of course, to his fall) So the word rendered “subtle” is rendered “prudent” in Proverbs 1:4; 8:12; 12:23; 14:8; and in a bad sense in Job 15:5; 1 Samuel 23:22; Psalm 83:3.

The word “beast” also, in Genesis 3:1, chay, denotes a living being, and it is as wrong to translate zôa “beasts” in Revelation 4, as it is to translate chay “beast” in Genesis 3. Both mean living creature. Satan is thus spoken of as being “more wise than any other living creature which Yahweh Elohim had made.” Even if the word “beast” be retained, it does not say that either a serpent or Satan was a “beast,” but only that he was “more wise” than any other living being.

We cannot conceive Eve as holding converse a snake, but we can understand her being fascinated (It is remarkable that the verb nâchâsh is generally translated to enchant, fascinate, bewitch; or of one having and using occult knowledge. See Genesis 30:17; 44:5, 16; Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10; 1 Kings 20:33; 2 Kings 17:17, 21:6; 2 Chronicles 33:6. So also is the noun used in Numbers 23:23; 24:1) by one, apparently “an angle of light” (i.e., a glorious angel) possessing superior and supernatural knowledge.

When Satan is spoken of as a “serpent,” it is the figure Hypocatastasis (figurative) or Implication; it no more means a snake than it does when Dan is so called in Genesis 49:17; or an animal when Nero is called a “lion” (2 Timothy 4:17), or when Herod is called a “fox” in Luke 13:32; or when Judah is called “a lion’s whelp.” it is the same figure when “doctrine” is called “leaven.” (Matthew 16:6) It shows that something much more real and truer to truth is intended. If a figure of speech is thus employed, it is for the purpose of expressing the truth more impressively; and is intended to be a figure of something much more real than the letter of the word.

Other figures of speech are used in verses 14, 15, but only for the same purpose of emphasizing the truth and the reality of what is said.

When it is said in verse 15, “thou shalt bruise his head,” it cannot mean His literal heel of flesh and blood, but suffering more temporary in character. When it is said (verse 15), “He shall crush thy head,” it means something more than a skull of bone, and brain, and hair. It means that all Satan’s plans and plots, policy and purposes, will one day be finally crushed and ended, never more to mar or to hinder the purposes of God. This will be effected when Satan shall be bruised under our feet. (Romans 16:20). This, again, will not be our literal feet, but something much more real.

The bruising of Christ’s heel is the most eloquent and impressive way of foretelling the most solemn events; and to point out that the effort made by Satan to evade his doom, then threatened, would become the very means of insuring its accomplishment; for it was through the death of Christ that he who had the power of death would be destroyed; and all Satan’s power and policy brought to an end, and all his works destroyed. (Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 20:10, 10) What literal words could portray these literal facts so wonderfully as these expressive figures of speech?

It is the same with the other figures used in verse 14, “On thy belly shalt thou go.” This figure means infinitely more than the literal belly of flesh and blood; just as the word ‘heel’ and ‘head’ do in verse 15. It paints for the eyes of our mind the picture of Satan’s ultimate humiliation; for prostration was ever the most eloquent sign of subjection. When it is said “our belly cleaveth unto the ground” (Psalm 44:25), it denotes such a prolonged prostration and such a depth of submission as could never be conveyed or expressed in literal words.

So with the other prophecy, “Dust shalt thou eat.” This is not true to the letter, or to fact, but it is all the more true to truth. It tells of constant, continuous disappointment, failure, and mortification; as when deceitful ways are spoken of as feeding on deceitful food, which is “sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth shall be filled with gravel.” (Proverbs 20:17) this does not mean literal “gravel,” but something far more disagreeable. It means disappointment so great that it would gladly be exchanged for the literal “gravel.” so when Christians are rebuked for “biting and devouring one another” (Galatians 5:14-15), something more heart-breaking is meant than the literal words used in the figure.

When “His enemies shall lick the dust,” (Psalm 72:9) they will not do it on their knees with their literal tongues; but they will be so prostrated and so utterly defeated, that no words could literally depict their overthrow and subjugation.

If a serpent was afterward called a *nâchash*, it was because it exercised fascination over other creatures, and if it became known as “wise,” it was not because of its own innate positive knowledge, but of its wisdom in hiding away from all observation; and because of its association with one of the names of Satan (that old serpent) who “beguiled Eve.” (2 Corinthians 11:3, 14)

It is wonderful how a snake could ever be supposed to speak without the organs of speech, or that Satan should be supposed able to accomplish so great a miracle. (Greater than that wrought by God Himself, who opened the mouth of Balaam’s ass)

It only shows the power of tradition, which has from the infancy of each one of us, put before our eyes and written on our minds the picture of a “snake” and an “apple”: the former based on a wrong interpretation, and the latter being a pure invention, about which there is not one word said in Holy Scripture.

Never was Satan's wisdom so craftily used as when he secured universal acceptance of this traditional belief: for it has succeeded in fixing the attention of mankind on the letter and the means, and thus blinding the eyes to the solemn fact that the Fall of man to do solely with the Word of God, and is centered in the sin of believing Satan's lie instead of Yahweh's truth.

The temptation of "the first man Adam" began with the question "Hath God said?" the temptation of "second man, from the Lord from heaven" began with the similar question "If Thou e the Son of God," when the voice of the Father had scarcely died away, which said, "This IS My beloved Son."

All turned on the truth of what Yahweh had said.

The Word of God being questioned, led Eve, in her reply, (1) to omit the word "freely" (3:2, cp. 2:16); then (2) to add the words "neither shalt thou touch it: (3:3, cp. 2:17); and finally (3) to alter a certainty into a contingency by changing "thou SHALT SURELY die" (2:17) into "LEST ye die." (3:3)

It is not without significance that the first Ministerial words of "the second Man" were "it is written," three times repeated; and that His last Ministerial words contained a similar threefold reference to the written Word of God. (John 17:18, 14;17)

The former temptation succeeded because the Word of God was three times misrepresented; the latter temptation was successfully defeated because the same Word was faithfully repeated.

The history of Genesis 3 is intended to teach us the fact that Satan's sphere of activities is in the religious sphere, and not the spheres of crime or immorality; that his battlefield is not the sins arising from human depravity, but the unbelief of the human heart. We are not to look for Satan's activities today in the newspaper press, or the police courts; but in the pulpit, and in professors' chairs. Wherever the Word of God is called in question, there we see the trial of "that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan." This is why anything against the true interests of the Word of God (as being such) finds a ready admission into the newspapers of the world, and is treated as "general literature." This is why anything in favor of its inspiration and Divine origin and its spiritual truth is rigidly excluded as being "controversial."

This is why Satan is quite content that the letter of Scripture should be accepted in Genesis 3, as he himself accepted the letter of Psalm 91;11. He himself could say "It is written" (Matthew 4:6) so long as the letter of what is "written" could be put instead of the truth that is conveyed by it; and so long as it is misquoted or misapplied.

'This is the object in perpetrating the traditions of the "snake" and the "apple," because it ministers to the acceptance of his lie, the hiding of God's truth, the support of tradition, the jeers of the infidel, the opposition of the critics, and the stumbling of the weak in the faith. (Companion Bible, Appendix 19, page 24-25)

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